CLEARING THE AIR

ENVIRONMENTAL TECHNOLOGY FIRM SAFEGUARDS THE WORLD'S TREASURES

by Aaron Thompson
Export America

Have you ever wondered how the priceless paintings of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel are protected from the ravages of time and air pollution? Or how the books at the Library of Congress are preserved? Just ask the people at Purafil, Inc., of Doraville, Georgia, the company that produces the dry chemical filtration systems that not only preserve some of the world's greatest treasures but also less-heralded areas such as control rooms at pulp and paper mills and even banana boats. Another thing they'll tell you, however, is that none of this would have been possible without the help of the U.S. Department of Commerce, which aided Purafil in its expansion into Europe, the Middle East, and, more recently, India and Australia.

A FRESH START

Purafil originated as a subsidiary of the Borg-Warner Corporation, a manufacturer of heating, ventilating, and air conditioning systems. In 1960, Borg-Warner designed a special line of air cleaning pellets, known as Purafil, which removed more gaseous contaminants than any other chemical agent on the market. Purafil became an independent company in 1969, mostly focusing on dry chemical filtration, removing corrosive contaminants from control rooms at pulp and paper plants in the United States. According to Meredith Christiansen, the company's marketing manager, "Purafil is like the air we clean—our systems are everywhere."

In 1987, the company changed its focus with the arrival of William Weiller as chief executive officer. Weiller saw that domestic sales were limited, and he wanted to expand into foreign markets, starting with the Middle East and Europe. "Our goal was to establish representation in all areas of the world," says Christiansen. "The need for clean air is everywhere, from mills and refineries to museums and office buildings. The best way to achieve this goal was through the help of the U.S. Department of Commerce." Following the Gulf War in March 1991, Purafil participated in a Department of Commerce (DOC) trade mission when Secretary of State James Baker led a delegation to the Middle East. As part of this initiative, the DOC created a forum where U.S. businesses could introduce their products and technologies to representatives from Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. This was Purafil's first overseas mission with the DOC, with the forum providing a venue for Purafil and other companies to network and establish business relationships. In 1989, Purafil also started working with Lincoln Martinez, supervisory international trade specialist at the DOC's U.S. Export Assistance Center in Atlanta. "Since William and I had worked for several years at the same company, there was a bond of trust that allowed us to skip the usual 'getting to know you' phase and jump right into doing business," says Martinez.

According to Karen Gailey, communications specialist at Purafil, one area in which the DOC has been particularly helpful has been in establishing credibility for the company overseas. "The Commerce Department puts us in touch with government officials in countries with which we're not often familiar, making the process a lot easier," says Gailey. Gailey claims that the DOC was particularly helpful in coordinating a breakfast luncheon in South Africa, attended by executives from Africa's 10 largest companies. Lincoln Martinez and the U.S. Export Assistance Center also arranged a televised interview with CEO Bill Weiller, giving Purafil an unprecedented opportunity to make itself known to the South African public and business community. Through this experience, Purafil arranged a contract with Engen Petroleum, Ltd., one of the largest oil companies in Africa.

PRESERVING THE WORLD'S TREASURES

One focus of Purafil's business that is especially interesting is the protection of museums and libraries through the use of Purafil products. Purafil installations are currently at such well-known sites as the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian, the Shanghai Museum in China, the Victorian Archives in Australia, the Santa Maria delle Grazie (housing da Vinci's *The Last Supper*) in Italy,

and the Tower of London Jewel House in England.

During Purafil's relationship with the DOC, the company has built a network of overseas contacts, and used services from Gold Key to advocacy. In the time that Purafil has been working with the department, exports have risen to 60 percent of all revenues, totaling $15–20 million annually, and Purafil products are currently operating in more than 60 countries. In 1991, in honor of these achievements, Purafil received the E-Award, which recognizes excellence in exporting and is given to fewer than 20 manufacturers every year. In 1997, Purafil won the E-Star award, given for contributing substantially to the balance of trade.

Purafil's most recent ventures have been in India, where the company is currently working with Reliance Petroleum, which is based in Gujarat. Reliance is the largest privately owned, vertically integrated refinery in the world, covering more than 21 square miles. Also, Purafil is working with a major fruit producer, providing efficient filtration systems for its banana boats that travel between South America and Europe. Purafil's systems remove ethylene, a naturally occurring gas emitted during the ripening process, and keep the bananas fresh until they reach their destination. Presently, Purafil is looking to the computer industry and the semiconductor market. Many companies require "clean rooms" for semiconductor production, and this often requires not only particle filtration but also molecular filtration, which is necessary for the extremely delicate components in semiconductor manufacturing. Currently, Purafil is working with United Microelectronics in Taiwan, IBM Saha Union in Thailand, Maxtor Corporation in Singapore, NEC in the United Kingdom, and Conexant in Mexico to provide control of airborne molecular contamination in these "clean rooms."

Purafil's deep bed scrubber installed at Chinese Petroleum Corporation in Taiwan is used to remove corrosive gases produced during the refining process.

Photo courtesy of Purafil, Inc.

We often take for granted the clarity of the air we breathe, but the people at Purafil realize the importance of air without particulates or dangerous gases. In conjunction with the Commerce Department, Purafil has expanded into nearly every region of the world, clearing the air in diverse locations. So, the next time you're viewing the Crown Jewels at the Tower of London, looking at the Fonz's jacket at the Smithsonian, or eating bananas, remember that your experience is all thanks to the business partnership between Purafil and the Department of Commerce. ■